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CENTERPIECE

Orlov seen as an emerging leader

By Leonard Bushkoff
Special to the Globe

As the Soviet Union enters its third year of Mikhail Gorbachev's program of change, Yuri Orlov, the Soviet physicist and dissident who now teaches at Cornell University, stands out for his insistence that tinkering with the system is not enough.

Only all-out democratic reforms, he argues, can create a modern society ready for the 21st century.

"Next to Sakharov, he [Orlov] is the most important leader of the Soviet human rights movement," says Harvard's Richard Pipes. "He is still finding his feet in this country, but he has tremendous honesty and credibility, and may very well become the leader of the emigration, of an organized political movement in exile."

And Philip Ketchian, an old friend and a consultant in physics, adds, "History will remember Orlov as one of the few Russians who really believes in political pluralism: differing parties, ideologies, points of veiw, with all of them free and competing. He is a beacon for the younger generation of Russians who are fed up with single-party government – no matter how liberal – and think about what real democracy means."

In the late '70s, Orlov was a target of KGB harassment and was arrested early in 1977. In May 1978, he was tried and convicted of violating Article 70 of the Soviet Criminal Code. Seven years at a labor camp near Perm in the Ural Mountains followed, then internal exile for another year and a half at the village of Kobyai, near the Arctic Circle in Siberia.

He was allowed to emigrate to the United States in October 1986, as part of the exchange that involved Nicholas Daniloff, of U.S. News & World Report, and Gennadi Zakharov, an accused Soviet spy and employee of the United Nations. Now Orlov, 62, is a senior scientist in physics at Cornell University.

"The Soviet bureaucracy really hates him," says Marshall Goldman, associate director of Harvard's Russian Research Center. "Orlov is not Jewish, or from an intelligentsia background, of one of the national minorities, but 100 percent Russian, working class, and he demands that they follow the legal rules. That threatens the whole system. Sure they hate him."

In a recent interview during an appearance at Harvard, Orlov discussed how his ideas changed. Born in a village, he grew up in an apolitical family in Moscow during the late 1930s. He read much Marx and Lenin, and while in high school attended lectures about their teachings. He remembers that some classmates, the children of victims of Stalin's purges, "simply disappeared from one day to the next. No one spoke of them. There was a school meeting, and we could feel something in the air, but no one spoke of them."

Globe staff photo/John Tlumacki

Yuri Orlov "is a beacon for the younger generation of Russians," says fellow physicist and old friend Philip Ketchian.

Nevertheless, "I knew from our newspapers and books, and from my teachers, that our country was the most democratic in the world, that ours was the only true democracy."

His stepfather was killed in battle during 1942; Orlov and his mother were evacuated from Moscow to the Ural Mountains, where he was assigned work in a new tank factory. He talks of how machine tools were placed on the frozen ground, how production began immediately, before there were walls or a roof. "It was the T-34 tank, very simple, very effective, without refinements; we built thousands of them."

At 20, he was sent to a military school where he became a Communist Party candidate and an officer. He saw battle during the war's last, victorious month. "War left

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no time for thinking," Orlov says, "but it was a wonderful time for observation."

With peace came discussions between Orlov and fellow officers regarding Russia's future. "I was becoming a democratic socialist, no longer a Communist." One reason, he says, was the KGB's clumsy attempt to recruit him to spy on his friends. He says he refused, first burning his political notebooks. "One of my friends said there was a political underground in Moscow; I determined to go there and join it."

He did return to Moscow, where he enrolled in Moscow University. Things exploded, he says, after Khrushchev's famous denunciation of Stalin in February 1956. Orlov had finished his PhD dissertation by then, and was working at the Institute of Theoretical and Experimental Physics. He addressed a Communist Party cell meeting, arguing that "the terror of the government had changed the face of the entire society" and calling for immediate democratization.

His fellow Party members applauded, he says, and some spoke out in agreement. Within five days, Orlov and the others were denounced in Pravda, the cell was dissolved, and he was expelled from the Communist Party and dismissed from his job.

Orlov says the liberal scientific community quietly supported him, and that money was collected to sustain him and his family. He was offered a job in Armenia where, he felt, the atmosphere was relatively liberal and the local penchant for independence worked in his favor.

Ketchian knew Orlov in Armenia, and helped teach him English: "I had an Agatha Christie novel; he would read aloud, and I would correct his pronunciation."

Orlov returned to Moscow in 1972. "He wanted to be where his colleagues were in theoretical physics, and that was in Moscow," Ketchian says. Orlov found some signs of political dissent. "We know about the nonviolent movement of American blacks, of Martin Luther King and the others," say Valentin Turchin, who knew Orlov and who now teaches physics in New York. "Gandhi was a household name for us; several of his books had been translated into Russian."

Turchin was head of a Moscow chapter of Amnesty International when Orlov and others organized the Helsinki Watch group in 1976, to monitor compliance with the Helsinki agreement on human rights, which the Soviets signed in 1975.

The KGB crackdown of 1976-78 against dissidents swept Orlov into a prison labor camp. He is reticent about that experience, but says he suffered from kidney, prostate and dental problems (he now has a complete set of false teeth), as well as tuberculosis, rheumatism and severe headaches.

Orlov nevertheless managed to read some of the Russian classics and those scientific works he could obtain, to write long letters filled with scientific comments, and "to study regularly and quite effectively, some one to two hours a day; sometimes I would manage three. I tried to catch that precious and rare thing, thought."